Holy Night

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I

Cut off from the world and secluded as we were, even in that godforsaken place of ours, one could still tell that tomorrow would be Easter. Yesterday, on Good Friday, we watched the Greek sentry patrol their frontier post, as they always did, but now with their guns pointing down—in recognition of the cosmic day of mourning. And in our post, the soldiers started their preparations from the early hours: doing their laundry, spring-cleaning, washing and shaving. They were all very cheerful; laughing and romping about like little children. A few were sitting to one side, bent over pieces of paper balanced on knees writing letters, totally absorbed in themselves.

Towards the evening, Arso the mess-officer came back from the company's post. This time his two mules were carrying an unusual load: painted red eggs, sweet Easter bread, cooked lamb and two barrels of wine. This was the famous 'ninth ration', special to the feast. The soldiers abandoned their tasks and charged into the yard. They made a huge racket asking Arso to open the bags right there and then. They didn't want to eat but simply to look at the eggs and the breads; but the strict mess-officer would not allow even this. Up on one of the windows appeared Kouzev, the section's non-commissioned officer. He was getting ready to shave, wrapped up in a white towel with thick lather over his whole face. In this state he could hardly shout out orders but his appearance alone was sufficient not only to put an end to the commotion below and to liberate the hard pressed mess-officer, but also to get some people immediately to lift the heavy bags and to carry them into the store-room.

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The volunteer Chanyu,[1] clerk on duty at our frontier post, had also come to the yard. His pen behind his ear, he had the tired and concentrated look of a man disturbed at his work who wants to get back to it as quickly as possible. And indeed, when he realized what the fuss was all about, Chanyu went back to his room. It was now easy to see how he kept himself busy and why he had not come out for the whole day. There was not much writing for him to do but he liked to stay in, reading for hours from a small book of the Gospels which he always carried with him. He also had the strange habit of underlining, often whole passages, with a small ruler which he kept only for that purpose. All this he did very slowly, with great care and concentration, just as he did all his work at the office.

When I first caught him underlining with his ruler he felt embarrassed but did not try to hide it. I used to enjoy talking with him and, without meaning to offend him, I played a little joke on him.

'Listen, Chanyu,' I said to him. 'You are committing a great sin, you know. Underlining some words means separating them from the other words as more important and more beautiful. But in the Gospels there are no prettier, or weaker, words or truths. Everything in them is equally true and equally beautiful; everything has to be accepted just as it is.'

This man, who had the strength of an athlete, could easily get embarrassed and blush like a child. His eyes blinked at me in dismay, despair creeping into his look, and he tried to give an answer, hemming and hawing something vague. I went out and left him alone. Thinking that I had just made an innocent joke, I quickly forgot about the incident. For a few days afterwards, Chanyu kept pacing slowly up and down the yard of the post, with his eyes to the ground, as if searching for something he had lost. From time to time he would stop, look up, and then on his face—with his wrinkled forehead and knitted eyebrows—there would appear a great sorrow like a heavy, painful thought. One day he came to see me on business. We spoke about many things. When we finished, I said that he was free to go. He then stopped and I noticed a child-like embarrassment come over his face again.

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[1] Chanyu, a diminutive from 'chan' meaning a bell.

'That other thing, Mr Second-Lieutenant,' he began with hesitation, 'what you said about the underlining... I have been thinking about it... No, you aren't right, Mr Second-Lieutenant!' he finished, emphatically and with pain in his voice.

'What is it that I'm not right about?'

'What you said about underlining words in the Gospels, that it is a sin. I thought about it—it's not a sin. We are meant to study everything well in order to carry out our duties, aren't we? That's why I underline: not because I want to put one thing higher than another, but just so I can remember things more easily. I thought about it and, as I now see it, there is no sin in this.'

Only now I realized what he had been thinking during his lonely walks across the yard of our frontier post; I saw with what great effort his straightforward and honest thought had travelled this short path of logical reasoning. From the bottom of my heart I felt sorry for my joke and, of course, fully agreed with him. Ever since then Chanyu has been using his ruler openly, and without fear. I was sure that today too he had been reading his book the whole time and, as always, both reading it and underlining it.

It was already past sunset. The night watch began as usual. The new unit formed up on the yard ready to relieve the guard. The officer cadet had finished his tour of the other posts and was back, ready to give his instructions to us as well. He was a young fellow, serving with enthusiasm and had a passion for long speeches. 'Be well on your guard!' he told us, probably just as he had been telling the guards at the other posts as well, 'Be well on your guard and don't think that because tomorrow is Easter, nothing can happen. On the contrary, the enemy will choose just a moment like this!' The bayonets clanked on the guns and the first patrol pairs left slowly on the path to the Mesta crossing.[1] It was a clear, cloudless night; above the black crowns of the fig trees and over the tall poplar trees shone many stars. Now and then a jackal howled in the woods and then it was all quiet again. This was enough to get all the dogs barking in the village and at the shepherds' huts in the fields. And one could clearly distinguish in this

[1] The river Mesta, or Νέστος in Greek, rises in the Rila Mountains and flows into the Aegean Sea near the island of Thasos. It became the Bulgarian-Greek border after the defeat of the Ottoman Turks in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13.

signal the barking of the guard dogs. Clearly, at the border too the night watch was in full swing. Amid the tall reeds of the river marshes and the thorny bushes, patrols pushed their way through looking out for the enemy, their eyes glued to the shining surface of the big river—that ominous line which no one dared to cross and over which always wandered the haunting shadow of death.

II

The news that came from the regiment's base positioned behind us was that tonight there was going to be an Easter service: all units were to gather at the regiment and stay for the common meal afterwards. We were also invited. This was no small temptation. We could go without risking too much because we would not be more than a kilometre or two away from our post, and would still remain within our sector. After all, was not the approaching feast of Easter a common holiday for us and for those on the opposite side? Everyone is inclined to believe that on such days there is an unspoken truce which makes hostile operations impossible. But who knows? Would not the enemy chose just such an occasion, as the officer cadet had said? And at the border, where uncertainty and tense expectation are something constant, every danger, however dimly imagined, is already possible and imminent. Thus it was decided that we should not go anywhere.

We stayed up late. The unavoidable melancholy and the feeling of loneliness, which always come upon you on the eve of big feasts when you are away from your family, or when you do not have a family, as well as the slight feeling of jealousy that just a few hundred metres behind us, at the regiment's base, all the others were at leisure and free of care—all this fretted our souls and made us anxiously quiet. I was reading something; the officer cadet was lying on his bed with his hands behind his head lost in reverie staring into the void. He had been up four or five times already, standing at the window with his hand over his eyes, pressing his face to the dark glass and looking outside. Then, returning somewhat dissatisfied, he would get back on his bed and drift off again. But after looking into the window for one last time, he quickly moved back and exclaimed joyfully:

'At last! It's rising!'

I jumped off from my place and just like him went to look outside. Far to the East, a wide burst of fiery glare was spreading over the dark tops of the trees cut by the black line of the horizon. It was as if a huge mass of fire was now blazing there. All around, the darkness was brightening up and over the cleared sky here and there shone a few stars. The moon was rising. The fiery glare was growing but the disk itself was not yet visible.

The rising of the moon, this charming and mysterious faerie of the night, is greeted here at the border as an occasion of joy. The moon is a friend and an ally—cherished and eagerly expected. The times when it rises and when it sets, the differences between the phases and their length—all this is studied in minute detail. 'Because, what is the border guard?' Kouzev would ask at the orals. And then proceed to answer himself, 'Eyes and ears'. And if the moon is up, one's duty is much lighter: the danger is not so terrible when you can see and measure things with your own eyes.

It was only natural, therefore, that when we saw the moon rise we all felt a sudden relief and became more cheerful. After that I did not return to my book again; the officer cadet started excitedly pacing up and down the room. He looked at his watch and said:

'It's already eleven. The bells must be ringing now. Oh, how they ring the Easter bells! It only ever comes back to me when I remember the thrill of my childhood years. The feasts are for children, they say. And rightly so, for where's that innocent and beautiful joy now!'

He made a few steps, remained pensive for a minute and then continued:

'Every year at this time I think of the same story. My heart melts when I think of it and yet it also brings me a kind of bitter pain. Wait, I will tell you the story, shall I?

I was a little boy back then, about six or seven years old. We were already up and were sitting by the fire. Outside we could hear the bells ringing! Dear Lord, what a joy I felt back then! It was as if the whole world was swinging in these sounds, and angels were singing outside. On the eve of big feasts, they always made us something new to wear. Even now I recall that aroma of new fabric which used to fill the house as we changed into our new Easter clothes. Everything, I remember everything very clearly. I had another brother too, younger

but more strongly built and more self-willed than I. He was such a whimsical little kid, getting upset and crying about the merest trifles. Besides, he had such an awful bass: it was impossible and terrifying to listen to his cries. This time he had started crying again. To this day I clearly see my mum's eyes turning to him with that unforgettable look in which there is no reproach and no threat but only a kind of gentle and quiet sorrow. 'Hush! Don't cry!' she said to him. 'Don't cry, my little boy. On this day even the birds are happy and you are crying.' Believe me; every single word she uttered was for me an undisputable truth. I imagined the red dawn in the sky, the black branches of the fruit-trees, and in them the birds waking up and chirping happily because it's Easter. 'Don't cry', my mum was saying, 'We will go to church. Jesus Christ will rise again. He is now buried in a grave of stones, shut up in it and locked. Soldiers are guarding him. But he will rise again.' 'How will he rise again?' incredulously and sternly asked my brother. Before he could realize it, he had calmed down and was listening enchanted—his look still sulky and his face still wet from the tears. 'How will he rise again?' my mum continued, pleased that she had managed to appease the evil tyrant, 'When they start singing "Christ has risen", he will fly out like a little bird and go to heaven....'

We went to church. I remember the great crowd of people with their faces brightly lit by the candles; I remember the solemn and mysterious ritual in the night; but even more clearly I remember the deep darkness hanging above the sea of human heads and over the waving church banners. Every so often I looked up into the sky. Only after persistent searching, the darkness would lift up its cover and I would get a glimpse of a lonely star in the distance. And then they started singing 'Christ has risen'. Suddenly, I saw it—just as I see it now—a little black bird flew out from under the eaves of the church and, winding its way up, vanished swiftly in the skies. Full of joy, and overtaken by the thrill of awakened faith I stretched my hand, pointed up to the sky with my burning candle and shouted very loudly so that everyone could here me: 'There he is! There he is!' No one, of course, paid any attention, and I got confused unable to understand why everybody was so indifferent. But I had waited and had seen it, just as my mum had told me and, most importantly, I believed in it with my whole heart.'

The officer cadet finished his story. Without meaning to, he had passed his excitement to me as well. Ahead of us were many of those moments when hosts of distant memories suddenly wake up to take you prisoner in their sweet embrace. It was no longer a question of anyone going to bed anymore. We could not stay inside the room. We quickly got ready and went out for our usual night round.

III

Once out in the yard, we were caught by surprise and compelled to stop, awed by the mysterious charm of the southern night. The moon was now fully up but its narrow crescent was still low in the sky, red as copper and without any radiance. Its deadened and feeble rays did not have the power to brighten up the darkness and only to the East the sky was lit and shone with the gentle lustre of blue satin. Glowing here and there were a few large stars. It was all quiet. No sound was to be heard and there was no movement to shake the black masses of the trees.

Suddenly, somewhere very near, an explosion of voices thundered, a strange and unfamiliar song, which soon died out as if caught and carried away, and then immediately we heard it again just as loud and clear. What was it? Had they already crossed the river to attack us? The sentry sounded the signal to assemble. Everyone—I and the officer cadet, and the guards who jumped out of the post with guns in their hands, and Kouzev, and Chanyu the volunteer appearing from nobody knew where—we all ran to the sentry. Once we were there, our first job was to look up to Indzhas, the mountain peak where, some three-four kilometres away from us, the Greeks had their main defences. The dark mass of the mountain rose high up in the clear sky but everything there was quiet; all we could see was the one bright spot of a fire which burned there every night. The singing was somewhere closer to us and lower down. Only a second or two later we realize what it is: they are singing 'Christ has risen'.

'The Greeks are singing,' said Kouzev, unperturbed, who had stepped forward. 'Around the church, that's where they all are. See there the lights of their candles. There's a lot of them, just look!'

Across Mesta, in the direction of the village which was invisible now, at the foot itself of the mountain the dark of night was the

thickest. And shining there were thousands of bright dots—some closer to us, joined together like embers, and others—further away, moving into the darkness like fireflies. Nothing else could be seen. But we knew that during the day we had sighted a small white church there. In the village there were several Greek units and up at the main fortification a few more. Apparently they had all come to celebrate at this church.

And suddenly we heard another, parallel singing starting from the opposite direction behind us. More muffled and more constrained because further away, it was just as broad and rising from as many throats. We turn: singing there were our men back in the regiment. They were also singing 'Christ has risen'. Below the black line of the horizon, we could see the sky-glare of their candles.

All this was so unusual and so unexpected! One of the soldiers laughed, tried to make a joke, and then, confused, shut up. The singing began again on both sides. Clear and close by we heard the choir which was just opposite us; in the short pauses, as a distant echo, we could heard the other. There could be nothing more imposing, nothing more solemn. The night was as quiet as before, the darkness joining all the silhouettes of the earth; above the chaos of the dark, even more boundless, hung the sky lit up by the few stars and the thin crescent of the moon.

It has been a long time now that the shadow of death has hovered over these places. Up at the high mountain peaks and down below in the fields—everywhere the earth was ploughed through with trenches and tied up in barbed wires, heavy with iron and concrete. Hidden in the dark, invisible and silent, gaped the iron throats of thousands of guns. And in the middle of these ominous and dark labyrinths, here and there huddled around the flickering glow of the lighted candles, there stood thousands of armed men with uncovered heads, and with lit up faces. They were singing and while their hands rested on their swords, or clenched their guns, their eyes were turned to the sky and their hearts were getting their fill of hope and of love.

We listened without saying a word. To one side, we could see the large silhouette of Chanyu the volunteer. He had taken off his hat; from time to time his hand moved and then rested on his chest, and he remained motionless with his head bent low. And suddenly, when in concert the last sounds faded away from both sides, by a strange

coincidence a shooting star passed through the Western sky. Its fleeting trace died out and dissolved in the silence of the night—an instant during which we felt as if everything around had stayed with a bated breath.

We waited for a moment but no further sound came to our ears. The bright spots at the foot of the mountain moved, started to recede into the distance in different directions and slowly died out. The bright sky-glare above the camp of our regiment vanished. The service on both sides had come to an end. The moon was now higher in the sky, shining more brightly over the black tops of the trees.

We left to go back to our post. The soldiers had returned earlier and a new incident had gathered them all in the yard. Through the open doors of the kitchen, where morning duty had already begun, a shaft of bright light was emerging; two large dogs looked imploringly inside from the doorstep, wagging their tales. These were guard dogs. Several of the frontier guards had come, and for them to come at this time something must have happened. And so it was: from the post nearest to us they had brought a man caught crossing the border. Kouzev had managed to interrogate him and proceeded briefly to fill us in on the matter.

We went to see the man. The soldiers made way and in the bright light which was coming out of the kitchen we saw him. Many different people had been caught crossing the border and in each one of them the deserter or the smuggler were easily recognizable. Nothing similar this time. In front of us was a strange, pitiful creature. Deadly, pale face, made even paler by his grey matted beard. Not clothes but a pile of rags, wet and covered in mud and silt, hung from his ugly body. It was as though this was not a man but the ghost of a drowned man who had come up out of the water. His talk was disjointed and vague. On top of it all he could not hear well. We understood very little of what he was saying. But he kept repeating the name of a village where he wanted to go; he had a daughter there with two children and he wanted to see them. And from everything we got him to say, this made the most sense and was the clearest; he kept repeating it even when we were asking him other completely unrelated questions.

'When did you cross the river?' I asked him and several times repeated my question, each time louder. He just stared at me,

indifferently, as if not understanding what I was saying to him. 'Tell me, when did you cross the river?'

'When they started singing in the village, Mr Second Lieutenant,' one of the soldiers who had brought him to us answered for him.

This new interrogation caught the attention of the other soldiers and they started drawing near. Only now I noticed that Chanyu was also among them. The expression on his face was worried and intense. Somewhere behind him the other soldier from the frontier post was speaking: 'Where we were, we could hear it very well,' he said. 'Over the water you hear much better.' They were talking about the singing a moment ago.

'Did you hear anything when you were crossing the river?' I asked again in a loud voice. 'Did you hear singing anywhere?'

'My daughter has two children,' he began again, lost in reverie and as if talking only to himself. 'Two. They must be grown up now. I haven't seen them at all.'

There seemed to be no other thought crossing this unfortunate and ailing mind. And maybe a few minutes ago, when the solemnly chanted 'Christ has risen' had echoed through the night, while at the same time he had been wrestling with the muddy waves of the river, these same words had again hung on his lips. Now water was pouring from all over him. He was bent and all shaky.

'Are you cold?' I shouted to him.

This time he heard me and answered in a gentle and quiet voice:

'No. I'm hungry.'

I saw Chanyu the volunteer flinch and make a vague jest; the other soldiers just hid away. My eyes met those of the officer cadet and I understood straight away what he wanted to say to me: 'Not a spy at all and no smuggler either. Just an unfortunate man, and nothing else!' We left the yard to go to our room. Instantly a hubbub of excited conversations started behind us. 'At mine,' we heard Chanyu say, ardently and loudly. 'At mine—in the office—where we can get the fire going as well.'

A moment later a strange sound from the outside made me get up and look out of the window. The soldiers were all in. Two figures were crossing the yard: Chanyu, carrying a plate in his hands, and Arso, the mess-officer, with bread in one hand and a candle in the

other. From the look on the strict face of the mess-officer I could tell that if he had made a concession he had done it not without hesitation and not for a light reason.

IV

The next day we were all late getting up. Outside, it was a beautiful, sunny day. By now the officer cadet was ready, pacing up and down the room and singing at the top of his voice one of his Russian love ballads. His whole person exhaled that healthy ability to enjoy life which is common to all young and untroubled people. I immediately recalled the story he told last night, his excitement, from which there was not a trace left now; I remembered the singing that we heard, and the prisoner we caught. And all of this appeared to me like a dream—loosely connected with something in the past and highly improbable.

I went down to Chanyu's room and found him bent at his desk. When he saw me, he got up leaving his little red book on the table. He put it down open on the page he did not want to loose. His face was tired and yellow as clay. He looked as though he had not slept a wink. Near the hearth, where Chanyu had lit a big fire, lay the prisoner covered with several groundsheets. Only his hair was visible, still full of sand, and his face, frail and yellowish as that of a corpse. When Chanyu left the room to go out on duty, I picked up his book and my eyes stopped at the words he had twice underlined: 'Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest....'

I went out and walked to the gates of a nearby farm. Bathed in bright sunlight, the mountain opposite was disclosing all the hidden parts of her night silhouette now in the motley attire of her many screes, rocks, glades and woods. Clearly visible were the defences at Indzas: the blazing rungs of the four barbed fences, the zigzagging trail of the trenches behind them with the dark eyes of the embrasures, the gaping holes of the casemates and on top of it all, just like the shells of gigantic tortoises, the cupolas of the big battery guns.